

GLACIER RAIL PARK: A TOAST TO TRANSFORMATION

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Work continues at the Glacier Rail Park site in Kalispell on Tuesday, Oct. 2. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

The celebrants drove a silver spike that memorable day in 1892 and then they all got hammered.

Well, maybe not all.

Kalispell resident George Stannard once described the celebratory mood marking the arrival of the Great Northern Railway to the city: "Beer and whiskey were as free as the fresh air, and that evening there were many men that were partly sober."

Monday's grand opening of the 42-acre Glacier Rail Park in Kalispell promises to be more staid. Post-event beverages will be coffee and bottled water.

Yet enthusiasm likely will run high. The event is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m.

Monday's word of the day might just be "transformative."

That's the adjective repeatedly uttered when officials describe the anticipated impact of the Glacier Rail Park and its companion multi-use trail on Kalispell, its downtown and the Flathead Valley.

The 1.5 mile Kalispell Trail ultimately will replace the railroad tracks that have, in recent history, served two companies that will be the rail park's first tenants. Just the prospect of the trail has helped lure businesses downtown, said Tom Jentz, director of Kalispell's department of planning and building.

Why a grand opening Monday, given that tenants CHS Mountain West Co-op and Northwest Drywall and Roofing Supply haven't moved operations there yet and the rails won't come up until after they do?

"We are celebrating that the rail park infrastructure is complete," said Kim Morisaki, business development and marketing director for Montana West Economic Development. "And we wanted to do that in early October instead of late October because it could snow anytime."

Morisaki added, "The rail is completed. The utilities are in. We are 'open for business.'"

CHS contractors have begun construction of the company's new fertilizer plant, which is rising skyward at the site off Whitefish Stage Road. And some concrete work has been completed for new grain elevators.

Ultimately, CHS Mountain West, whose parent company is Minnesota-based CHS Inc., once known as Cenex Harvest States, will also site at Glacier Rail Park its retail store and regional offices. ACHS will build its fueling station at the intersection of Montclair Drive, East Oregon Lane and Flathead Drive.

Northwest Drywall and Roofing Supply plans to launch construction in April 2019, according to Pamela Mower, general manager. Construction should be complete by October 2019, she said.

The company receives by rail about 65 percent of the products it sells.

"We will continue to operate in our current location, receiving rail shipments, etc., and plan on remaining open for business during the move," Mower said. "Bottom line, this move will not cause us to close for any amount of time."

The earliest chapters of the rail park project and the companion trail were written decades ago, when advocates for a revitalized downtown Kalispell began to discuss ripping up the tracks.

More recently, discussions began in 2010 about how to revitalize downtown's core. Jentz and colleague Katharine Thompson King, among others, shepherded a process that yielded a Core Area plan in 2012. The plan reported that removing the railroad tracks slicing through the core area was a priority.

"The number one question then became, 'We have two businesses being served by the rail line; what do we do with them?'" Jentz said.

The answer required a unique partnership with the city and the Flathead County Economic Development Authority.

Ultimately, FCEDA bought the Brownfields site once occupied by a gravel pit operation. The authority has provided other funding too, including about \$14.2 million to help facilitate the move by CHS in exchange for CHS signing over properties it owns in central Kalispell.

"I would say that FCEDA and the city of Kalispell are the hand-in-glove partners that have made this work," said Morisaki.

Her employer, Montana West Economic Development, a private nonprofit, provides staff for FCEDA.

Other partners include Mission Mountain Railroad, a short-line railroad that will run the rail yard and a trans load facility there and provide a connection to BNSF Railway.

BNSF plans to discount by \$500,000 the sale of the abandoned right of way that will become the Kalispell Trail.

A boost for the \$21 million rail park and trail project came in 2015. The U.S. Department of Transportation awarded the venture \$10 million from its TIGER grant program, with TIGER being an acronym for Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery.

Jentz has high hopes for the rail park and especially the trail, which he said could be a catalyst for redevelopment and might someday provide a link in a chain of trails from Flathead Lake to Glacier National Park.

Turner Askew, chairman of FCEDA, said his career in commercial real estate leaves him optimistic about properties along the trail.

"What's going to happen is, when the railroad tracks come out, there is going to be a lot of real estate that's visible," Askew said. "People are going to say, 'What can I do with that?'"

Officials hope to begin removing trails sometime in 2019, with construction of the trail to launch during the summer of 2020.

Morisaki said her organization has communicated with companies that might be a good fit for the Glacier Rail Park. Now that the park is complete she believes recruiting could yield results.

Meanwhile, an artifact from Kalispell's railroad past will be in the mix during Monday's grand opening.

In 1892, according to lore, George Stanford crafted a railroad spike from eight silver dollars "contributed by the ladies of Kalispell."

In 1904, the Great Northern Railway relocated its main line to Whitefish. The silver spike ultimately wound up in the possession of the Stumptown Historical Society in Whitefish.

Jill Evans, the society's executive director, will escort the spike to Monday's ceremony, though she joked that Kalispell history buffs might make a play for the relic.

"I'll be the one guarding the silver spike with my life," she said.

Jentz referenced the spike.

"We want it back!" he said, smiling.

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